

**AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO BANGKOK'S  
UNDERGROUND ART SCENE**

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For decades, Thailand has been called the Land of Smiles. The moniker is well earned, but those pearly grins mask deeper troubles. Six months of social unrest nearly brought the country to its knees in 2014. That's when the Royal Thai Armed Forces staged a successful coup d'état to defang democratic leaders and institute a "temporary" National Council for Peace and Order. A proverbial reset button – in the form of elections – was promised by military leaders but has not yet come to fruition. (Interim Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has already pushed back the date four times.)

No one knows this better than Bangkok's underground art community. Although the Thai government supports some vital arts institutes, like the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre and the Thailand Creative & Design Center, independent gallery owners sometimes go head to head with military personnel, who monitor their work for controversial social, political, and religious themes.

As the capital gears up for its inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale, kicking off this July and running through September, artists and curators are gathering the courage to speak out in new and subversive ways. Here, four art-world insiders reveal their favorite spaces for seeing Bangkok's most thought-provoking work.

Bangkok CityCity Gallery has great programming, including street art, social advocacy shows, and art book festivals. Their recent exhibition, "SOS Souled Out Studios," was a good example of subtle criticism of our current political situation. Some of the street artists in the show, like Alex Face and Muebon, are well established. Alex Face is the most prominent graffiti artist in Thailand – a true pioneer. Muebon's work in "SOS" was about an affordable condo project [Rangsit City Village] built more than 20 years ago. The project was aimed at working- and middle-class people, and launched with a massive advertising campaign. It was a dream for people to have their first house with a swimming pool and a nice community. But it has since become a slum, with empty pools and lots of toilet bowls, which Muebon incorporated into the show as a nod to Marcel Duchamp. Muebon has been very involved with the kids in this community, organizing workshops with them. So his art is about this dream-turned-nightmare and what's left right now.

'SOS' was curated by British expat Beejoir, whose own work was also part of the show. The piece he did was inspired by a community on the Southwestern coast of Thailand, where he has a house and where he has observed local fishermen struggling with less and less fish in the sea. When they can no longer fish, they sell their boats and their

personal belongings to survive. He bought a boat from the fishermen and rebuilt it as this beautiful, small house with an old-school Thai roof and fish scales. Inside there was a silver sculpture of a dying fish, which he molded from silver belongings he bought from the fishermen. The whole exhibition was very well executed – energetic, sarcastic, and funny, but also melancholic.”